

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 490

CE 073 439

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TITLE Women, Welfare & Mandated Education: An Analysis of Single Mothers' Meaning of Learning and Its Relevance to Successful Programming.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education (14th, Wheaton, IL, October 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports -- Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Basic Education; *Adult Learning; *Compulsory Education; Economically Disadvantaged; Educational Attitudes; Educational Research; *Employment Programs; Federal Legislation; *Mothers; One Parent Family; Policy Formation; Student Attitudes; *Welfare Recipients; Womens Education

ABSTRACT

A study analyzed how a group of single welfare mothers, heads of households mandated to participate in a preemployment program with an educational component, viewed learning. Welfare policy makers assumed a highly illiterate population whose "deficiencies" would be remediated through participation in existing, voluntary basic education. Studies indicated, however, that a majority of such programs were not preparing the women for job entry. Because success was often contingent on the program itself, interaction between participants and staff, and participants' perceptions and expectations based on past school experiences, the sociology of education provided the theoretical framework. Research was conducted within the qualitative paradigm with 16 welfare mothers in a mandated educational program who agreed to indepth interviews. Five themes emerged: significance of the caring teacher; desirable learning environment; match of instruction to learning ability and preference, enhanced self-esteem, and distinction between kinds of learning. Test results confirmed learning success for the studied group. However, conflict theory remained applicable, since assumptions about their "deficiencies" prescribed policy mandates without attention to what meaning these women give to learning. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/YLB)

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WOMEN, WELFARE & MANDATED EDUCATION:

AN ANALYSIS OF SINGLE MOTHERS' MEANING OF LEARNING

AND ITS RELEVANCE TO SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMMING

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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Irene C. Baird

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed how a group of single welfare mothers, heads of households mandated to participate in a pre-employment program with an educational component, viewed learning from their perspectives. Welfare policy crafters assumed a highly illiterate population whose "deficiencies" would be remediated through participation in existing, voluntary basic education. Studies indicate, however, a majority of such programs are not preparing the women for job entry. Since success is often contingent on the program itself, interaction between participants and staff and participants' perceptions and expectations based on past school experiences, the sociology of education provided the theoretical framework. Research was conducted within the qualitative paradigm with sixteen welfare mothers in a mandated educational program agreeing to in-depth interviews. Five themes emerged: significance of the caring teacher, desirable learning environment, match of instruction to learning ability and preference, enhanced self-esteem, distinction between kinds of learning. Test results confirmed learning success for the studied group; however, conflict theory remains applicable since assumptions about their "deficiencies" prescribe policy mandates without attention to what meaning these women give to learning.

INTRODUCTION

To date there is little information on the meaning of learning for single welfare mothers who are legislatively mandated to participate in a pre-employment program with an educational component. Crafters of the Family Support Act of 1988 (Institute for Research on Poverty, 1988-1989) assumed a high rate of illiteracy among this rapidly increasing population. In order to meet potential employers' articulated need for, at least, reading, writing and reasoning skills they mandated for them the inclusion of basic education in pre-employment training. Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) programs, administered by welfare departments, were the federally designated medium for providing the requisite preparation. A Southport Institute for Policy Analysis (SIPA) study (Chisman & Woodworth, 1992) found the educational component within JOBS was not achieving its goal of providing adequate educational preparation for removing welfare participants from their dependent status. SIPA reported that administrators and employers equated possession of a GED with employability; that, as a cost saving measure, many welfare recipients were placed in existing ABE or GED programs that often bore little resemblance to the kind of learning the women needed for successful job entry, let alone retention and mobility. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) study within California (Martinson & Friedlander, 1993) focused its evaluation of mandated education on its effect on employment outcomes; it found limited benefits accruing from the educational component.

The intent in this study, in contrast, was to focus on what learning meant to a specific group of single welfare mothers, a topic hitherto unexamined. Since the literature states that the foundations for learning are established in school (Luttrell, 1993; Keddle, 1980), the women's responses would provide planners and adult educators with insights on how they viewed learning within and outside of the schooling context and what impact this had on mandated post-schooling. The sociology of education provided the theoretical framework since the

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purpose of its theories is to explore how society classifies, transmits and evaluates knowledge (Bernstein, 1971). Conflict theory within that framework focuses on the inequalities, exploitation and coercion foisted and perpetuated on lower socioeconomic classes (Giroux, 1983). This paradigm, therefore, seemed appropriate for viewing a population stereotyped as being idle, dependent, illiterate and requiring welfare policy mandates as remediation for such "deficiencies."

Given the purpose of trying to understand meaning single welfare mothers attached to learning, the research was conducted within the qualitative paradigm using in-depth interviews. Sampling was purposive and size was determined by those women in a mandated program who chose to be interviewed. Sixteen agreed to do so. Each interview lasted one and a half to two hours, was taped and transcribed verbatim. A flexible, open-ended guide ensured inclusion of all questions and allowance for unexpected information. Emergent categories provided four foci: schooling, post-schooling, out of school learning and the learner. Five major themes evolved: From the school learning context they were the significance of the caring teacher, the importance of teaching techniques conformable to the learning styles and abilities of the participants and the desirability of an environment conducive to learning. Themes resulting from focus on the learner included the positive perspective of self as person and learner and the identification and distinction between kinds of learning. Although welfare policy is destined for change, the insistence of job training and education may remain a constant. This study, therefore, is significant in that, though in a limited way, it provides some insights into the meaning and manner of learning for a female population that may be faced with stronger mandates within pre-employment preparation. From the practice perspective, therefore, it should assist both planners and adult educators in designing programs that would better prepare the participants for self-sufficiency. This study indicates to researchers the need for further study on women's learning, specifically for those women from diverse racial, ethnic and social class groups who do not seem to be attracted to adult education.

SINGLE WELFARE MOTHERS AND LEARNING

The words "single welfare mothers" evokes a negative stereotype, especially in the current climate of welfare reform debate. The perception is that this is a homogeneous group ... illiterate, idle, unwilling to work to support themselves and their children. By being provided public assistance, they are viewed as being "easy in their poverty," to use Benjamin Franklin's words (Garfinkel & McClanshan, 1986, page 91). The sixteen participants in this study shared in common their socioeconomic status and their participation in a mandated program; otherwise, each was viewed as an individual with her own abilities, interests and views. One was Anglo-American, one Puerto Rican, and fourteen, African-Americans. Their average age was 30 and all had at least one child, no more than five. Five were high school graduates, one with honors. Of the eleven who had dropped out of school between the eighth and twelfth grades, three had received their GEDs; the others were working towards that goal. A few participants liked school; a few hated it intensely. The majority thought it was "OK" because of friends, activities and classes such as cooking, sewing, gym. The significance of early schooling was that irrespective of her reaction to school, each participant encountered at the elementary or middle school level one special teacher who took time to help, thereby making a difference during the time the participant interacted with him or her. To quote one woman, "he seemed like he cared ... for us to learn."

The mandated pre-employment program was located at a community college. It evoked a unanimous positive reaction even though it was mandated, had a structured format and required attendance and participation. The women saw in the teachers the same traits that characterized the early school "special one:" They cared, they took time, they wanted them to succeed. Evidence of such traits, as well as the teachers' attention to their learning preferences, had a positive impact on their performance and progress. They learned best by

doing, that is, with a hands-on approach of being shown and then repeating the process for reinforcement. Said one woman,

It's easier for me to learn with someone that will teach me than learning from a book ... A book has so many words to it and on one subject there can be so many ways to learn it, and if you don't understand the book to learn, then you will never get it.

They considered the community college ideal: They were treated as adults in a quiet, uncrowded atmosphere where classes were small and paced. The campus, itself, was also non-threatening because of a diverse student population into which the women blended comfortably. As a result of the teachers, the environment and instructional methods, they experienced enhanced self-esteem. As learners they perceived themselves as quick and above average provided they were taught "the right way," namely through observation and doing for reinforcement.

They made a sharp distinction between learning they equated with school, where you are taught something and primarily with books, and common sense, the way you handle life experiences. The ability to finally understand and be able to do fractions they perceived as a more legitimate form of learning than replacing the transmission in a car, which several women could do. They felt each kind of learning had its place, with the exception of one woman. She noted that although she equated learning with books and school, "a lot of school work is common sense ... once you know that one plus one equals two, ain't nobody got to tell you nothing. That comes natural."

ANALYSIS

Based on the data, with key descriptors in the participants' language, the single welfare mothers in this study considered themselves average to good learners who understood, comprehended material that was shown to them. They defined "the right way" as watching what was being shown, once or several times, followed by "hands-on practice, repetition to master the material. It was "mapping meaning" onto doing the task (Gowen, 1992, page 82), demonstrating that learning had taken place. Ideally, it was a self-paced process that occurred in a quiet environment, sometimes independently, preferably as a cooperative venture. Ongoing counseling services sustained them and recognition of even small successes enhanced self-esteem.

Unfortunately there is limited research on the issues of learning addressed in this study, particularly with reference to low income and marginalized females (Baird, 1994). Luttrell (1993) supports not only the use of school experiences as a starting point for research on women's learning, but also reinforces the potential significance of this study. She writes that there is very little documentation in this area and limited ethnographies of adult basic education programs and/or classrooms. She adds that this is "a current gap given the conventional wisdom that past schooling experiences are determining factors in current educational pursuits" (page 513).

Why did these women both learn and feel they learned well in this program? The caring teacher, the environment and the teaching techniques were significant factors. Fine (1985) contends that there must be a reason for coming to school: a climate that nurtures intellectual curiosity, initiative and creativity. Otherwise there is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. The responses of the single welfare mothers to the pre-employment program and resulting self-esteem attest to that. Belanky et al's study on the lives of college women may also be applicable to the participants in this study. "She found that even the rebellious ones wanted some structure in their educational environments, " ... overburdened by home and work responsibilities [they] had neither the time nor energy to map out their own strategies" (1986, page 204).

The single welfare mothers, just as participants in Gowen's (1992) study, approached learning as "mapping meaning" onto action rather than words. They were allowed to *do*, the best they knew how, until they "comprehended," they "knew." The enhanced self-esteem these women experienced is congruent with Gowen's findings. She noted the importance of the acquisition of the GED to self-esteem. "Earning a GED is symbolically powerful in part because it is not simply a credential for advancement for work, but an acknowledgement of self-worth (1992, page 115). The women in this study not only expressed "... my esteem is higher than ever" as a result of their academic performance, they also seemed to be translating the learning acquisition to the expectation of finding a job that would lead to self-sufficiency and a better life.

Despite this seemingly successful educational experience, however, equality for these women is still illusive. They experience what Willis calls "an in-built disadvantage of having the wrong class culture" (1977, page 28): They are single welfare mothers, heads of households, dependent on public assistance. The reality they face, once employed, is an immediate increase in housing costs and, within a year, the loss of medical benefits. For the black women, according to Ogbu (1987), there is the additional factor of their believing that education does not pay given their parents' and community members' subjection to unemployment, underemployment and discrimination. Paradoxically, therefore, though the JOBS program succeeded in preparing these women for employment, the economic and social realities facing them underscore the inadequacy of an approach that sees education as the single issue to reducing reliance on welfare; it also underscores from this perspective the appropriateness of the conflict paradigm.

CONCLUSIONS

The implications from this study are that even a "captive" student population can be retained, respond favorably and benefit academically from interaction with a teacher who cares, who values them as adults, who is able to relate the educational material to their "real life" experiences in a way they understand, in an environment conducive to learning. One of the salient learning issues was the definition the women made between kinds of learning, namely school learning and common sense. The question becomes one of how to resolve learning for the work place without diminishing or devaluing the kind of learning with which these women are comfortable. From a larger perspective it is one of which kind of learning is valued and which, delegitimized; it then becomes a social issue for further race, class and gender studies.

With increasing numbers of diverse women seeking employment, Gowen (1992) stresses the need for further studies of women's learning, stating there is little known about the meaning women attach to knowledge they have or are seeking and its relationship to their lives. This study underscores that need, highlighting especially the dearth of information about women outside of the traditional white middle class. Such studies should be significant to welfare reformers who base their decisions on assumptions rather than on adult education research findings, and to planners looking for effective methods for retaining a hard to reach audience. As the probe continues on the meaning and manner of learning, especially among marginalized females, Luttrell "reminds us that what is most memorable about school is not what is learned but how we learn" (1993, page 538).

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Presented at the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, National Louis University, Wheaton, IL, October 12-14, 1995.